

Rep. Lofgren Co-Signs Letter to President Bush Urging Him to Address Human Rights in Vietnam

Washington, D.C. – Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) recently authored a letter that was also signed by Reps. Tom Davis (R-VA), Loretta Sanchez (D-CA), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), James McGovern (D-NJ), Frank Wolf (R-VA), Neil Abercrombie (D-HI), Edward Royce (R-CA), Maurice Hinchey (D-NY), Trent Franks (R-AZ), Michael Honda (D-CA), Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), calling on President Bush to directly address human rights during the upcoming visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to the White House. The letter also urges that the administration redesignate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

Full text of the letter below:

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Bush:

In light of the upcoming visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to the White House, we write to express our strong concerns regarding human rights conditions in Vietnam. Despite Vietnam's claims to the contrary, human rights conditions in Vietnam have steadily deteriorated. We hope that you will use Prime Minister Dung's visit as an opportunity to address these deteriorating conditions. We also strongly urge you to redesignate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that Vietnam be named a CPC every year since 2001. The State Department followed this recommendation in 2004 and 2005 but removed this CPC designation in November 2006. Since then, the Commission has continued to recommend CPC status for Vietnam. This designation was again recommended by the Commission in its May 2008 Annual Report:

The Commission maintains that the State Department's removal of the CPC designation for Vietnam in November 2006 was premature. In addition to the fact of ongoing religious freedom violations, removing the CPC designation suspended the diplomatic framework that had led to a productive bilateral engagement on religious freedom and other human rights concerns and therefore removed the potential incentives and leverage needed to urge the Vietnamese government to continue to improve its human rights record. Thus, in order to address Vietnam's persistent, severe religious freedom concerns and articulate fully to the Vietnamese government that religious freedom and related human rights are critical matters affecting bilateral relations, the Commission urges the U.S. government to re-designate Vietnam a CPC.

We are also very concerned about the numerous "prisoners of concern" currently being held in Vietnam as well as the State Department's failure to acknowledge this problem. In testimony before the United States Senate's Foreign Relations Committee in March 2008, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill stated that "all those individuals that the United States had identified as prisoners of concern for reasons connected to their faith" had been released by Vietnam and that for this and other reasons Vietnam "no longer qualifies as a severe violator of religious freedom." However, the Commission calls into question the State Department's rationale for this finding:

The Commission believes that the State Department's attempts to define religious prisoners as those arrested for "reasons connected to their faith" makes too rigid a distinction between "political" and "religious" activity not consistent with international human rights law. The Commission is convinced that there are scores of religious prisoners of concern, who have been detained and imprisoned, in part, for their attempts to exercise their religious freedom or to advocate on behalf of it. They include Nguyen Van Dai and Fr. Nguyen Van Ly and Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Khmer, and UBCV Buddhists. In addition, the Commission reports that there are hundreds of Montagnard Protestants, who have been imprisoned following 2001 and 2004 demonstrations for land rights and religious freedom. The Commission asserts that these religious prisoners of concern should be included in any discussion of whether Vietnam is, to use the language of the International Religious Freedom Act, a "severe violator of religious freedom."

These detentions are in violation of international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Again, we hope that you will use Prime Minister Dung's upcoming visit as an opportunity to address the concerns we have described. We also strongly urge you to redesignate Vietnam as a CPC, as recommended by the Commission in its May 2008 report. United States interests in Vietnam should not be encompassed solely by trade, and we believe that the redesignation of Vietnam as a CPC will affirm our nation's role as an international protector of human rights.

Sincerely,

Zoe Lofgren
Tom Davis
Loretta Sanchez
Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
James McGovern
Frank Wolf
Neil Abercrombie
Edward Royce
Maurice Hinchey
Trent Franks
Michael Honda
Dana Rohrabacher

cc: The Honorable Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State

Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren is serving her seventh term in Congress representing most of the City of San Jose and Santa Clara County. She serves as Chair of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law. She also Chairs the House Administration Subcommittee on Elections and serves on the House Homeland Security Committee. Congresswoman Lofgren is Chair of the California Democratic Congressional Delegation consisting of 34 Democratic members of the U.S. House of Representatives from California.